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## **Hiring Student Workers as Subject Experts in Archives: A Case Study**

Laura Romans

### **Introduction**

Archives and special collections continue to face increasing workloads while funding, especially for full-time staff positions, remains stagnant if not diminishing. For many archival managers, employing student workers is a favorable solution in that it provides the institution with needed assistance while also affording the student opportunities to develop workplace skills and experience. Oftentimes, student employees are hired based on general competencies desired by managers such as good problem-solving and communication skills; however, many student workers can bring specialized content knowledge, even expertise, to the position. This expertise can be utilized to the benefit of the library while allowing the student to flex their knowledge and gain professional confidence by serving as an authority. The University of Tennessee Libraries' Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives recently hired a student employee specifically because of their expertise in a content area for which there was a considerable knowledge gap among the full-time employees of the department. Although the student was originally hired to focus on a single project, ultimately the student's supervisor crafted a personalized and mutually beneficial employment experience for the individual which built upon their content strengths and skills while also addressing a backlog of work within the department.

### **Literature Review**

Discussions of student employment within libraries, particularly academic libraries, has a healthy history in library literature. As Carol Waggoner-Angleton concisely declares, "Student assistants and American academic libraries have a long association."<sup>1</sup>

Student workers have become a necessity within many academic libraries. Stated by Julia McKenna, these students

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Waggoner-Angleton, "Attitudes about and the Affects of the Use of Student Assistants in Special Collection and Archives," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 31, no. 2 (2013): 165.

“supplement limited professional staffing, allow for students to engage with their academic community, and give work opportunities to those currently enrolled in school.”<sup>2</sup> The literature around student employment in libraries has largely focused on the tasks that managers provide their students, i.e., what work is appropriate to assign a student worker. As the placement of student employees within the library has become a given, the literature has shifted to reflect this, acknowledging this fact by directing attention to better recruitment and retention of high-quality student workers. Academic library literature has also recently moved toward conversations around how to make student employment within libraries more meaningful, both to the institutions and to the students.<sup>3</sup>

An area with growing, but still less robust, discussion is the role of the student employee in archives and special collections settings. This dialogue often revolves around students in internships, practicums, or other course-related employment situations. However, as noted by Emily Gainer and Michelle Mascaro, “it is important to note that interns work in a different dynamic than other student workers in archival settings.”<sup>4</sup> These course-related employment circumstances typically involve students pursuing, or at least interested in, an archival career, and these students often arrive with a baseline knowledge of archives and special collections. While internships and other course-related employment positions are both vital and advantageous, they do not represent the breadth of student employment possibilities with special collections departments. Additionally, as Waggoner-Angleton points out, with archival literature traditionally focusing its conversations around student work solely within the context of internships, this means that when it

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<sup>2</sup> McKenna, “So Many Students, So Little Time: Practical Student Worker Training in an Academic Library,” *Journal of Access Services* 17, no. 2 (2020): 74.

<sup>3</sup> Mimi Benjamin and Theresa McDevitt, “The Benefits and Challenges of Working in an Academic Library: A Study of Student Library Assistant Experience,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 44, no. 2 (2018); Rosan Mitola, Erin Rinto, and Emily Pattni, “Student Employment as a High-Impact Practice in Academic Libraries: A Systematic Review,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 44, no. 3 (2018). See each of these articles for in-depth literature reviews related to student workers within the academic library.

<sup>4</sup> Gainer and Mascaro, “Faster Digital Output: Using Student Workers to Create Metadata for a Grant Funded Project,” *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 30, no. 1 (2012): 10.

comes to general student employment, archival managers are left to parse through relevant library literature and cobble together the bits and pieces that might apply to them.<sup>5</sup> Although it is useful to acknowledge the areas in which archives and academic libraries overlap, archives and special collections settings are unique, and their requirements for student employees are as well.

This article aims to address gaps in archival literature on student employment by discussing a successful project in an academic special collections unit where a specialized experience was created for a student worker who possessed content proficiency in a subject on which staff did not possess the requisite knowledge. While not without its challenges, this unique experience mutually benefited the institution and the student while ultimately increasing access to several of the department's archival collections. By discussing the full experience in detail, including the successes, privileges, and challenges, this case study aims to be a roadmap for other archives and special collections departments to adopt a similar format for an individualized student employment scenario in order to address content-specific shortcomings while also providing a challenging and enriching experience for the student worker.

## **Background**

At the University of Tennessee Libraries, the Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives (Special Collections) acquires, preserves, and provides access to rare and unique materials supporting the needs of their university community, largely students and professors, as well as scholars. Functioning as both an institutional archive and a collecting repository, their collections document the history and culture of the university, the state of Tennessee, and the greater Southeastern United States. The department is made up of eleven full-time employees, including five professional archivists and librarians and six para-professionals, as well as several undergraduate and graduate student workers. Staff collect materials, manage collections, and facilitate the use of those collections through researcher assistance, undergraduate and graduate instruction, exhibitions, events, and more.

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<sup>5</sup> Waggoner-Angleton, "Attitudes," 165.

## Project

One of the many projects that the Special Collections department regularly undertakes is the creation of digital collections as a way to further preserve and provide access to their unique holdings. Through collaboration with the Libraries' music librarian, the Special Collections department embarked on an ambitious project to digitize a portion of the papers of musician, composer, and educator David Van Vactor (1906-1994), an important figure in the world of music and to the university and community. Van Vactor moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1947 to serve as both the head of the newly created Department of Fine Arts at the University of Tennessee as well as the conductor of the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra. His appointment rejuvenated both entities and created a lasting legacy in the community's music scene. Special Collections is fortunate to hold Van Vactor's papers, a collection totaling 56 linear feet comprised of original musical compositions, arrangements of other works, memorabilia, sound recordings from his performances, and much more, all of which provides insight into his long and prolific career. To break a significant amount of work into manageable tasks, and to highlight the most unique material from the collection, the initial digitization project was scaled to include only Van Vactor's original compositions. This body of work includes an impressive array of over 100 original pieces represented by 475 items as Van Vactor kept the various versions of many of his works, such as preliminary sketches, handwritten scores, publisher's copies, and final publications. It was imperative to the project leads that each of these versions appear in the digital collection because revealing the creative process of a composer was one of the many exciting facets of the project. This digital collection is meant to serve a variety of purposes. The content draws attention to a little-known yet important community figure while also diversifying the format of material represented in the Libraries' digital collections by adding various states of pre-published and published notated music. Additionally, the digitized materials have the potential to reach a range of audiences including the university's dedicated music performance and composition students, the music and history lovers of the community, and music researchers around the world.

The overall process and workflow of the project functioned in the same vein as many digital projects within the Libraries, through

much collaboration and inter-departmental work. The manuscripts archivist and music librarian served as co-curators for the project, selecting and preparing items from the collection for digitization as well as serving as content experts on the materials. The digital collections librarian supervised the lifecycle of the project, ushering it through its various stages and movement between departments. The metadata librarian oversaw metadata decisions and remediation. The Digital Production Lab managed the digitization of the material. And finally, the Digital Initiatives department brought all of the pieces together to ingest the collection into the Libraries' digital collections repository and make it available to the public.

From the outset, the project leads decided that hiring a student employee dedicated to metadata creation would be essential for the project to move along at a reasonable pace; while overseeing the creation and workflow of the digital collection was well within the scope of their jobs, especially the manuscripts archivist, creating detailed metadata for a digital project consisting of almost 500 items was not. Much like Gainer and Mascaro discuss in their article on training student employees for metadata creation, this type of project proved to be a good opportunity for "leveraging the use of student workers."<sup>6</sup> In addition to the project leads not having enough time to create detailed metadata, other students and staff in Special Collections did not have the desired musical expertise. Given the format of the content being digitized, the project leads decided that the student employee selected for this work should possess a strong knowledge of music in order to create accurate and robust descriptions of the material. Logistically, the student would report to the manuscripts archivist and work out of the Special Collections department in order to have access to the collection.

Another driving force for this project, which also aided in the decision to hire a dedicated student, is an endowment within the Special Collections budget to be used toward music-related collections and activities within the department. In the years leading up to this project, the endowment had been underused; therefore, in consultation with the head of Special Collections, it was chosen to

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<sup>6</sup> Gainer and Mascaro, "Faster Digital Output," 8. See this article for a thorough discussion specific to employing student workers to create metadata for digital projects.

fund this student position. This allocation meant that the position would not draw from the Manuscripts unit's regular student employment budget, allowing the unit to continue to employ its usual number of student workers in addition to this special project position.

Special Collections regularly hires student employees to conduct all manner of tasks within the department. In the Manuscripts unit, student workers largely spend their time processing collections—arranging material and writing finding aids—but they also help with creating collection inventories, collection maintenance, exhibit planning, and much more as needs arise. The manuscripts archivist crafted a specific job description for the project position based on the description customarily used for these student employees. Constructing a formal job description for student employment positions does take time, but it allows the supervisor(s) to assess and communicate potential tasks and conditions of the job as well as desired skills and knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In addition to advertising for a person with musical knowledge, the job description also stressed the many transferable skills that the student could cultivate while working on the project. It is important that potential student workers understand that working in an archives or special collections setting will provide them with an opportunity to practice and enhance skills that can be used in many future career or educational settings like communication, problem-solving, and critical thinking.<sup>8</sup>

The job advertisement was posted to the Libraries' employment webpage as well as to a campus-wide platform for on-campus student jobs that is run by the campus career center. Additionally, the music librarian assisted by specifically pushing the advertisement to faculty members and student groups within the School of Music. The job description not only included a call for someone with knowledge of music, but also recommended that the person be a graduate student. This decision was made with hopes that a graduate student would not only bring more maturity to the position but also that they would have more advanced musical knowledge. Moreover, if the chosen individual were in a graduate

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara L. Floyd and Richard W. Oram, "Learning by Doing: Undergraduates as Employees in Archives," *American Archivist* 55, no. 3 (1992): 442.

<sup>8</sup> Pam Hackbart-Dean, "Managing Processing Staff: Hiring, Training, and Retaining," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 30, no. 1 (2012): 38.

program, they would be eligible for a higher pay rank; the project leads felt would be fair as the student would be undertaking more advanced work than many other student employee positions within the Libraries. While each department within the Libraries is responsible for their own hiring of student employees, the ranks and associated pay are dictated by the Libraries administration and Human Resources as a whole.

The interview process for this position functioned similarly to all student employee positions in Special Collections. Interested candidates were asked to submit a resume and cover letter explaining their interest in the job. The manuscripts archivist reviewed all applications. Due to the specific qualifications of the job, this position received fewer applications than is typical for Special Collections student positions; however, those that did apply met most of the elevated specifications requested. The manuscripts archivist met with the top candidates for a brief interview that consisted of an overview of the position and the project as well as a small number of routine interview questions. As with all student jobs in Special Collections, holding interviews is another vital step in the process and is advantageous to both parties. During the interview, even if brief and less structured, the supervisor can further assess candidates' qualities and experience as well as address the job responsibilities in detail. At the same time, candidates can get a better feel for the position and environment during the interview and will have an opportunity to ask questions about the role. Based on the application materials and interviews, a single candidate stood out: a first-year graduate student in the School of Music studying both music performance and musicology. This student did not have any prior experience working in a library or archives nor did she have any interest in these environments for her career path; she simply hoped to find a part-time job on campus for convenience and felt her knowledge and training as a musician fulfilled the job requirements. In addition to her strong background in music, she also had experience in customer service that pointed toward strengths in organization and teamwork.

Once the graduate student library assistant (GSLA) was hired, training began. Good training is imperative to the success of any employment position, and within the Special Collections department training is a crucial component of student worker



development. While the time commitment may feel excessive on the front-end, quality training can reduce time spent later to correct errors or reeducate.<sup>9</sup> The manuscripts archivist first replicated much of the training used for all Special Collections student employees such as an overview of the work of the department, general workplace policies and procedures, and proper handling for working with rare materials. For student workers within the Manuscripts unit, training also includes an introduction to archival theory and the basics of processing archival collections. Although this GSLA was not going to process, she would be working very closely with a single collection and therefore the manuscripts archivist found it necessary for her to have an understanding of archival collections, their arrangement, and their uses.

The GSLA was encouraged to spend unaccompanied time browsing the David Van Vactor collection and finding aid to become more familiar with the creator and the collection, and specifically to orient herself with the original compositions that were to be the focus of the digitization project. An unanticipated benefit of the GSLA familiarizing herself with the material in preparation for the project is that she was able to identify music in the collection, especially among Van Vactor's handwritten preliminary sketches, that had previously been unidentified. This not only enhanced access for these items, it allowed for additional connections to be made among the works as these sketches could now be linked with later versions of the same composition.

Because of this project's specificity, the manuscripts archivist also allocated time within the GSLA's training for studying the Libraries' digital collections as well as digital collections of sheet music and musical compositions from other cultural heritage institutions. This allowed the GSLA to familiarize herself with the anticipated end product of the project. The informal survey of other music-related digital collections also bolstered the GSLA's knowledge to assist in planning and decision-making. In addition to becoming familiar with the department, the collection, and the project, this introductory and training time allowed the GSLA and the manuscripts archivist to get to know one another and learn each

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<sup>9</sup> Gainer and Mascaro, "Faster Digital Output," 20.

other's working and communication styles prior to embarking on the project.<sup>10</sup>

Once the GSLA had familiarity with the work of the department as well as the details and goals of the project, she next met with the metadata librarian for training who introduced the GSLA to MODS metadata and the institution's local practices for metadata creation. They also discussed additional fields that might be appropriate for this specific project, especially in relation to music. With the GSLA's knowledge of the collection as well as music expertise, she helped to determine appropriate terminology and identify fields that would provide additional information useful to researchers with a more music-centric focus. Added fields document instrumentation as well as agents like publishers, transcriptionists, and lyricists. The GSLA and metadata librarian also collaborated to identify supplemental information from the physical items that needed to be captured, such as handwritten inscriptions, annotations, and other notes, as well as their associated field.

A few weeks of training went into this project before the GSLA ever began working to move through each piece of music and create metadata. While this was certainly a large time commitment on the part of the GSLA, the manuscripts archivist as supervisor, and the other librarians with whom the GSLA consulted, all involved believed this time spent early on to truly understand the collection and the project would pay off as work progressed.

Once orientation and training were complete, the first task for the GSLA was to prepare the items for their delivery to the Digital Production Lab for scanning. Due to the size of the collection, the material was broken down and sorted into smaller batches for ease and control. The GSLA moved through each box to ensure folders were properly labeled and to mark any items that were not to be scanned, such as duplicate copies. After delivering the first batch of material to the Lab, the GSLA continued working to prepare the physical material so that each subsequent batch would be ready for transfer.

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<sup>10</sup> Tracy Grimm and Neal Harmeyer, "On-the-Job Information Literacy: A Case Study of Student Employees at Purdue University Archives and Special Collections," in *Learning Beyond the Classroom: Engaging Students in Information Literacy through Co-Curricular Activities*, ed. Silvia Vong, Manda Vrkljan (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2020), 79.

After preparation of the material was complete and the Lab finalized their work on the first group of items, the GSLA began to focus the entirety of her time on creating metadata for each individual piece of music. As the material on which she was working had already been scanned, the GSLA was able to provide an additional layer of quality review by checking the scans against the physical items as part of her process. She created detailed metadata in a collaborative spreadsheet set up by the metadata librarian. Through this tool they were able to document ideas or changes as well as ask questions and communicate with one another when issues arose. If necessary, they scheduled short meetings to work through problems that could not be resolved remotely.

As the GSLA's supervisor, the manuscripts archivist checked in regularly with the student employee, both formally and informally, to observe the direction of the project, answer questions, and provide timely feedback. While the GSLA largely worked independently, it was crucial to the manuscripts archivist to maintain regular communication in order to monitor the pace of the work and provide support to the GSLA. However, it was equally important that the GSLA be afforded adequate space and authority to complete her work; she had been hired for her critically-needed content knowledge, and it was essential to treat her as the expert that she was.

It was important to the project team to include the GSLA in project meetings and updates as often as possible. In addition to her subject expertise, her knowledge of the material increased as the project progressed and her presence became crucial in the decision-making process. She used meetings to speak to any irregularities that she saw and to bring up issues to the entire group for democratic decision-making. The team continually stressed their gratitude to the GSLA for her contributions to the project. Displaying this interest and appreciation helped the GSLA see herself as not only integral to the project but as contributing to the overall work of Special Collections and the Libraries.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kindra Becker-Redd et al., "Training Student Workers for Cross-Departmental Success in an Academic Library: A New Model," *Journal of Library Administration* 58 (2018): 157; Gainer and Mascaro, "Faster Digital Output," 19.

After the work for the digitization project was complete, the GSLA was able to transfer her now-extensive knowledge of portions of the collection and its creator to enhancing description of the physical collection. The GSLA enriched the finding aid by supplementing information at the item and folder level and increased specificity at the collection level by expanding the creator's biography, enhancing the collection's abstract, and adding new and more relevant Library of Congress subject headings.

Once the Van Vactor digitization project and the work on the physical collection were finished, the GSLA began to improve the descriptions of other music-related archival collections among the holdings of the department. This included adding more granularity to sheet music collections or collections of musicians that had previously been described at only the collection or box level. The manuscripts archivist also identified and prioritized small unprocessed music-related collections in the department's backlog to be processed and described by the GSLA. Similar to her work with the Van Vactor collection, she was able to add more accurate and relevant information to collection abstracts, subject headings, and biographies as well as create more detailed headings at the folder or item levels. The broad training that took place at the beginning of the GSLA's employment contributed to this flexibility and to the ability to seamlessly shift to other projects within the department.

## **Reflection**

### *Challenges*

One of the most difficult challenges of this experience was the precarity of the GSLA's employment. Similar to other temporary staffing solutions, the GSLA brought much needed content knowledge to the department and to the collections, but that knowledge left at the end of her employment. Fortunately, her term with the department was lengthy enough to accomplish several additional projects beyond the one for which she was hired. However, there were significant time investments made by full-time staff, particularly at the outset of the project and especially by the manuscripts archivist as this position's supervisor. With any type of

temporary position, these likely costs and losses must always be weighed against the potential benefits.<sup>12</sup>

Another challenge with this project was scheduling. Due to the GSLA's strict academic schedule and other jobs, she worked in Special Collections for ten hours per week. This was enough time for the project to progress at a decent pace, but if team members had questions for the GSLA or needed to meet with her, it had to be addressed or scheduled during those ten hours. Another drawback of the project, specifically for the GSLA, was that this employment provided a very specific work experience. This student was not interested in a career in librarianship or archives, so while the position afforded her the opportunity to develop many general skills, it was not a project that would immediately translate into her career goals.

### *Successes*

The main success of this project was the invaluable specialized content knowledge the GSLA provided. While some managers suggest aligning projects with student workers based on their skills and interests, this is typically done after the students are hired. This can require creativity to retroactively match a student to a project or collection for which they have interest or subject knowledge. The greatest advantage of this experience was that the project team identified the knowledge gap prior to hiring in order to find and employ a student that possessed proficiency in that content area and had the skills to fill that gap. Her content expertise not only benefited the digital project for which she was hired, it allowed for the enhancement of many collections, both digital and physical, in meaningful ways for potential researchers.

As a graduate student in the university's School of Music, this GSLA was someone who would potentially use the digital collection for coursework or research. The perspective of a potential user helped to inform several of the decisions made by the project team. A common benefit for many student workers in archives or special collections settings is their increased knowledge of the department's activities and resources.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the GSLA could

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<sup>12</sup> Floyd and Oram, "Learning by Doing," 447.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin and McDevitt, "Benefits and Challenges," 259.

also serve as an advocate to her peers and instructors in the School of Music for the relevant resources within the Special Collections department.

Throughout the project, the team continually provided the GSLA the appropriate space and authority to conduct her work, encouraging her and cultivating her investment in the project. This empowerment contributed to the GSLA's retention, which ultimately led to her taking on additional responsibilities on more advanced projects and becoming a leader among the department's student workers. The GSLA was able to mature in the position and gain more and varied experiences. Additionally, it helped the productivity and culture of the department.<sup>14</sup> Much like Firouzeh Logan found, "by entrusting students with responsibility for entire projects and interesting work rather than bits and pieces of nonintellectual work . . . students become vested in their work and stay in their positions for several years, becoming valuable assets to their library."<sup>15</sup>

This project was also advantageous for the GSLA. Like many positions in archives and special collections settings, as well as academic libraries as a whole, this employment provided the GSLA the opportunity to develop several skills that could easily be translated into later positions in her career. These settings allow student employees the chance to develop wide-ranging skills such as time management, critical thinking, problem-solving, and synthesis of information.<sup>16</sup> In this particular instance, embedding the GSLA into the project team and its conversations as often as possible created additional opportunities for her to cultivate advanced skills, including professional communication and collaboration. Furthermore, her retention and growth in the position led to leadership opportunities among the department's other student workers. A more personalized employment position such as this one can not only generate a meaningful experience for the student, it can

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<sup>14</sup> Erin Rinto, Rosan Mitola, and Kate Otto, "Reframing Library Student Employment as a High-Impact Practice: Implications from Case Studies," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 26, no. 4 (2019): 270.

<sup>15</sup> Logan, "Student Workers: Essential Partners in the Twenty-First Century Academic Library," *Public Services Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2012): 320.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin and McDevitt, "Benefits and Challenges," 259. Hackbart-Dean, "Managing Processing Staff," 38.

assist in their development of skills that will transfer to future educational, career, and even lifelong learning settings.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, for archives and special collections attached to academic institutions, student employment is an avenue to support the larger educational process and contribute to student learning.<sup>18</sup> These departments not only have a responsibility to support the education of their students, they are “uniquely positioned to build connections between students’ curricular and work experiences.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, student employment demonstrates the value of the department and the library to the mission of the larger institution.

## Conclusion

Although not without its challenges, this experience ultimately proved successful and beneficial for all involved, and it can serve as an example for archival and special collections institutions. By identifying a knowledge gap within the department, intentionally hiring a student employee with expertise in that area, and investing time and trust into that student’s work, several projects were completed, including the addition of new content to the Libraries’ digital collections and the processing and enhanced description of several languishing collections. Creating a more personalized student employment experience based on the student’s content strengths was also beneficial to the student who developed more advanced skills while in the position.

Many archives and special collections rely on student workers, but rarely do they purposefully invite those students to serve as authorities in content areas in which they have proficiency. As demonstrated by this case study, that can be an oversight. While archivists continue to consider and assess student employment, it is imperative to do so in ways that will provide maximum benefits to all involved. One way to do this is by having student employees bring specialized content knowledge to the department. By

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<sup>17</sup> Erin Passehl-Stoddart, “‘Let Me Tell You What I Learned’: Primary Source Literacy and Student Employment in Archives and Special Collections,” *American Archivist* 81, no. 2 (2018): 449.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin and McDevitt, “Benefits and Challenges,” 256.

<sup>19</sup> Jill Markgraf, “Unleash Your Library’s HIPster: Transforming Student Library Jobs into High-Impact Practices” (Paper presented at the Association of College & Research Libraries Conference, Portland, OR, March 2015), 771.

empowering students with meaningful projects and treating them as experts, they are more likely to stay in library positions throughout their educational tenure. While this requires intentional and substantial work on the part of the supervisor, especially at the outset, the lasting results are invaluable.

**Laura Romans** is the manuscripts archivist with the Betsey B. Creekmore Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Tennessee. In this role, she builds, maintains, and promotes their manuscripts collections which document the rich history, culture, and people of the east Tennessee region. Previously she worked with the South Carolina Digital Newspaper Program. She received her MLIS from the University of South Carolina.